

Redesign Family Engagement Activities to Be Deep Learning Experiences

Many schools struggle to get a high turnout at school family engagement events. Understandably, it can be frustrating for staff when a lot of effort in planning and organizing the events yield disappointing attendance results. To change the outcome, we must elevate the experience and the value added for families.

This digest provides educators with fresh ideas for elevating family events — practical, evidence-based, and family-centered ways to make these events more personal and purposeful for families and schools.

Get to Know Your Families Right Away

Relationships and trust are the foundation of effective partnerships. Reach out and visit (in person or virtually) each of your classroom or homeroom families before the start of the new school year. Be prepared with a list of questions about the student and the family — the goal is to learn as much as possible about their routines, aspirations, preferences, values, and assets.

What you learn will help guide and inform your classroom instruction and the individualized support that you provide to students and their families. Be prepared to listen with keen interest. Your effort to reach out and get to know families will help them feel seen, heard, and valued. Keep connecting with them and invite them to connect with you often. Consistent outreach is how trust and partnerships are cultivated.

Important information to learn about each family:

- The names of each family member
- The activities they enjoy doing together
- The student's talents and passions, what they love to do and read about
- The best time to communicate and catch up on developments at home, student progress, and home learning support



Use Open House as a Time to Assemble Your Classroom Team of Families

During open house, have a designated time for all your families to meet in your classroom. Use this time for introductions and for families to meet and learn about each other. Have your chairs placed in a circle to make it easier to see and talk to each other. You can even sit outside if the weather allows. The goal is for families to network and feel connected to their teacher and to their peers. This is your team — these are the families you will be partnering with to help your students learn and thrive.

Share with families key academic and nonacademic skills that students are expected to master over the course of the school year. You can share real stories and end-of-year work samples so families understand what they are helping their children work toward. The main message of your family open house meeting is mutual collaboration, high expectations, and partnership.

Activities to make your open house meeting personal and engaging:

- Ask every family member to wear a name tag so everyone can be on a first-name basis.
- Start the meeting with a fun team-building activity (this activity is about the adults getting to know each other).
- Create a family phone and email list and ask permission to share it.
- Ask families about the information they want to receive from the teacher and their preferred mode of communication.
- Share information about yourself, including details that show you are human and relatable.



Make Parent-Teacher Conferences a Mutual Learning Experience

Parent-teacher conferences are often a stressful experience for both families and teachers, but they don't have to be, especially if you have taken the time to get to know each of your families.

Build upon relationships. Parent-teacher conferences should build upon the relationships you have been working to establish. The more you know and understand the families, the more mutually meaningful and genuine conferences become.

Provide practical information and guidance. As you plan, remember that parent-teacher conferences are most effective when teachers: (a) provide families with a complete and accurate picture of how their children are progressing academically and personally, and (b) model practical ways that families can support academic and social and emotional development at home.

Place families' needs at the center. To make the conferences more collaborative and inclusive, ask families in advance what they are most interested in sharing and learning. Make family voice the centerpiece of the meeting experience.

A few tips to enhance the parent-teacher conference experience:

- Offer a flexible conference schedule and spread your meetings with families over many days and even weeks.
 - Start by meeting with the most vulnerable students first so their families can be better equipped to offer home learning support.
- Based on the students' needs, prepare activities for families to practice at home with their children.
 - Model how to do those activities at home and how to assess the children's progress.
- Share and discuss progress data.
 - Cocreate learning goals based on that data to inform family learning support.
- Draw from personal experience, if possible.
 - Facilitate the kind of conference you would want from your own child's teacher — let that motivate and inspire you.

Aim for Deep Learning During Title I Academic Nights

The primary role of the partnership between teachers and families is to help children learn and succeed academically and personally. Teachers receive professional development and collaborate with coaches and peers to improve instructional effectiveness. On the other hand, families have few similar capacity-development opportunities offered by the school to help them improve how they provide targeted home learning support for their children. However, Title I academic nights are excellent opportunities to offer deep learning and equip families with skills, competencies, and resources that increase their ability to be effective partners for learning.



Here are some strategies to help schools increase the impact of Title I academic nights:

- Differentiate family meetings by grade level, and position teachers as content experts and facilitators of these family learning opportunities.
- Start grade-level meetings with a team-building activity to help teachers and families feel more relaxed and to help them connect and expand their relationships with each other.
- During planning, use data to determine the content focus or academic skills of your meeting with families so families are clear about their children's learning priorities.
- Facilitate a short lesson on the academic skill(s) you have selected to help families understand, and discuss the importance of the skill and how it connects to everyday life.
- Share and discuss progress data, and cocreate learning goals to inform family learning.
- Model a couple of engaging activities that families can use at home to support learning, and provide the resources needed for home practice.
- Facilitate the meeting using adult learning strategies.
- Allow time for families to practice activities, ask questions, discuss new learning with other families, and provide feedback.

